

Forum: Congress turning its back on hard-hit workers



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The news is not good for Connecticut's working class, at least where Washington is concerned. There is little that this Congress can be expected to deliver for the 40 percent of the Greater New Haven population who work hard, yet don't quite make enough money to pay their bills.

Last week, I was fortunate to be invited by U.S. Sens. Richard Blumenthal and Chris Murphy to Connecticut Day at the Capitol, a high-level briefing for community leaders. We heard from a number of current and former elected officials, including Barney Frank, Chris Dodd, Chuck Schumer, Barbara Boxer, Bob Corker, Jeff Flake, and others. It was fascinating to hear directly from our elected representatives about the challenges they are facing within the legislature.

At the beginning of the conference, "Meet the Press" moderator Chuck Todd spoke to us of what he sees happening in this congressional session. Clearly missing was any kind of governmental relief for low-income working people.

Most of us are aware of the heart-wrenching needs of people living below the federal poverty level. Some may even have heard about families with babies seeking emergency housing at our local homeless shelters, or about the long lines at our soup kitchens. These are the people we had in mind in 2009

when United Way of Greater New Haven, where I am the president and CEO, and the Jewish Federation of Greater New Haven started a joint effort called Neighbor-to-Neighbor LifeLine. Neighbor-to-Neighbor raises money to fund emergency shelter and food operations to get help quickly and efficiently to the people in our community who needed it the most.

While unfortunately this need is still great, our social landscape has changed since the darkest days of the recession. Today, we are also concerned about our neighbors who have jobs, and play by the rules, but struggle to get by. Last September, Connecticut United Ways released a comprehensive study of this population, which we call ALICE — a United Way acronym for Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed.

I asked Todd about the prospects for ALICE, the 40 percent of our neighbors whose income falls below a “household survival budget,” which includes an actual calculation for the local cost of housing, child care, transportation, and health care. These wage-earners cannot survive without governmental or philanthropic assistance. Todd acknowledged the problem, but said more than likely nothing would be accomplished in this session around this issue.

ALICE represents people for whom the American Dream is broken. They work in jobs that support our day-to-day lives: they are child-care workers, office managers, health care providers. Their wages have been stagnant since the Great Recession. And, especially considering this region’s high cost of living, many of them are living on the edge of a financial cliff: one major car repair, health care crisis, or layoff removed from being unable to pay their rent or mortgage.

This is not just a theory: we see the evidence at our homeless shelters. Twenty-four percent of the mothers with children looking for emergency housing at New Reach’s family shelters had earned income when they showed up needing help. Eight percent of the single adults who came to Columbus House for emergency shelter had jobs.

Anecdotally, leaders at local food pantries and soup kitchens tell us that many of those who show up needing food have jobs. They just don’t earn enough to put food on their table. This is a population that should be in the sweet-spot for government assistance. A relatively small investment in rental assistance and a security deposit can give people the stability they need to avert a further downward spiral. Many of those in the ALICE population earn too much to qualify for SNAP (food stamp) benefits, but not enough, sometimes, to feed their families.

Back in 2009, at the height of the Great Recession, United Way of Greater New Haven and the Jewish Federation of Greater New Haven formed a historic partnership to raise money and quickly get it to the population in crisis. Neighbor-to-Neighbor LifeLine was born during a time of emergency, and together we have been able to help more than 20,000 people avert or pull out of a crisis. We have been able to serve more than 1.2 million additional meals to children and adults, and we have been able to provide more than 4,000 individuals with emergency shelter or housing services to prevent homelessness.

For many of us, thankfully, the financial crisis is a distant memory, our paychecks steady, our jobs that much more secure.

But as ALICE demonstrates, it is a mistake to think that the recovery, even with the great news of a jobs rebound, has filtered to lower-wage workers.

With our political leaders stymied, ALICE and other financially stressed members of our community have nowhere to turn to but to us — neighbors who care enough to open up our hearts and our pockets and make a generous donation to give our struggling neighbors a lifeline.

Jack Healy is the president and CEO of United Way of Greater New Haven. To make a donation to Neighbor-to-Neighbor LifeLine, visit <http://n2nlifeline.org/>.